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Expanding the Catholic view on faith and politics

Tom Roberts | Oct. 12, 2008

A NATION FOR ALL: HOW THE CATHOLIC VISION OF THE COMMON GOOD CAN SAVE AMERICA FROM THE POLITICS OF DIVISION
By Chris Korzen and Alexia Kelley
Jossey-Bass, 145 pages, $24.95

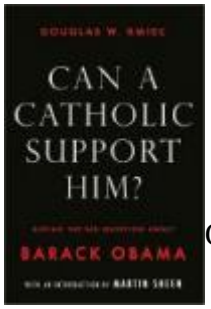
If the three books under consideration could somehow transform into individuals around a table, the result would be a high-level, compelling Catholic conversation rich with a sense of history and an understanding of the complexity and tensions inherent in considering the place of belief and believers in the public debates of the day. Not a bad group to consult before the upcoming election. The discussion, it is worth noting, would also be blessedly free of shrill extremes, a luxury one can organize in a conversation but not in real-life politics.

In terms of the current election, the timeliest book is the one with the most immediate title, *Can a Catholic Support Him?Roe*," he writes, referring to the Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion.

Few have more "street cred" in opposing abortion. So if the orthodoxy of the antiabortion movement confines political support only to those who would vote to ban abortion, with no mitigating circumstances allowed, what's he doing supporting Barack Obama?

Mr. Kmiec is not only deeply read in the social justice tradition (he's taught courses in it), he also understands the subtleties of moral reasoning and he knows well the documents that popes and bishops have produced. And none would uphold single-issue politics.

He goes to the heart of the extremist argument: that a politician who refuses to work to ban abortion is complicit with evil and so, by extension, is any Catholic who votes for such a politician. According to this argument, there can be no mitigating circumstances.



CAN A CATHOLIC SUPPORT HIM? ASKING THE BIG QUESTION ABOUT BARACK OBAMA
By Douglas Kmiec
The Overlook Press, 174 pages, $12

Mr. Kmiec accepts that but writes that doesn't mean that Catholics are prohibited from voting for politicians who may think it unwise to overturn *Roe* v. *Wade* yet work to restructure economic conditions to, for instance,

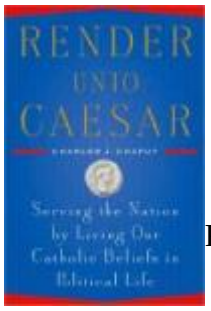
make abortion less likely.

“It certainly does not mean that Catholic voters cannot make candidate choices that can reasonably be thought to establish social justice policies that advance the culture of life,” he writes.

Whenever a person of stature and learning publicly makes such a dramatic and fundamental switch, it grabs our attention and, perhaps, skepticism. Is it real? Are there hidden motives? Mr. Kmiec’s change of party allegiance, at least for this election cycle, certainly seems real and deeply considered. And he’s paid a price in the scorn of the far right. In one searing incident about which he writes movingly in the book, he was publicly humiliated from the pulpit and then denied Communion.

The greatest value of Mr. Kmiec’s small book is that he provides Catholics with accessible language and a rationale from deep within the Catholic tradition to counter the single-issue terrorists who hold out excommunication and hell as the punishment for thinking differently about a complex public issue.

Archbishop Charles Chaput has an engaging and conversational style of presenting a rather gloomy assessment of American culture -- one that might find resonance across the divisions of party and church factions -- and yet an understanding embrace of pluralism and the democratic process.



RENDER UNTO CAESAR: SERVING THE NATION BY LIVING OUR CATHOLIC BELIEFS IN POLITICAL LIFE
By Archbishop Charles J. Chaput
Doubleday, 258 pages, $21.95

(In an interesting connection, Mr. Kmiec speaks approvingly of Archbishop Chaput’s book *Render Unto Caesar* , but one wonders what he might say of the archbishop’s pronouncement earlier this month that vice presidential candidate Joseph Biden, a Catholic senator who does not support overturning *Roe*, should refrain from receiving Communion.)

If the futility of the Republican focus on overturning *Roe* became the turning point for Mr. Kmiec, fear that Catholics are too accommodating to a sometimes hostile culture that finds religion repugnant is a key motivation for Archbishop Chaput’s concerns.

The archbishop ranges over a wide spectrum of subjects, including an engaging section on church and state and a retelling of the historic tensions between Christianity and the political cultures in which it has resided. His reading of the abortion issue is straightforward but allows the benefit of the doubt to those who might vote for someone who does not support overturning *Roe*, though only after they have struggled mightily with that decision and only for the most compelling of reasons.

One gets the impression that Archbishop Chaput enjoys a bit of back-and-forth and would be a provocative conversation partner at the imaginary table. One strong theme that colors much of the book, however, is his belief that early and virulent forms of anti-Catholicism have morphed into subtler and more insidious forms. Given the prominence of Catholics, however, from the Supreme Court, to presidential candidates, to Congress, to leaders of finance and industry, one wonders how deep anti-Catholicism runs. Or is it more a case of the

archbishop's impatience with those who don't follow a certain brand of Catholicism?

If there is an alternative to his sense of gloom about the Christian/Catholic enterprise in society, one might see it in Chris Korzen and Alexia Kelley's *A Nation for All*, an explication of the Catholic vision of the common good. Catholic social teaching and the common good can remain fairly squishy concepts unless applied to particulars. The most difficult part is to define the teachings -- what are they, where did they come from, to whom do they apply? The authors have taken the main themes treated in the "Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church," released by the Vatican in 2004, and applied them to the United States and to a Catholic vision of the common good. The book is a good primer on key themes: human dignity, common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, preferential option for the poor, the rights of workers and care for creation, among others.

It provides a look at the origins of some of the strains of teaching, at how popes from Leo XIII through Benedict XVI have built on the church's convictions about the common good, including strong critiques not only of Marxism but also of capitalism. The demands of justice can be severe coming from the papal pulpit, a reality that is not often preached from parish pulpits.

Whatever the outcome of this year's election, one gets the sense that a new front has been established in the discussion of religion in the public square. Mr. Korzen and Ms. Kelley represent, respectively, Catholics United and Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, two of the new groups on the political landscape intent on revitalizing the notion of the common good. Their contribution and those of Mr. Kmiec and Archbishop Chaput all elevate the Catholic contribution to our political conversation.

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